CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT

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FINAL RECORD OF THE EIGHT HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FIRST PLENARY MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Thursday, 22 March 2001, at 10.10 a.m.

President: Mr. Hu Xiaodi (China)

GE.01-61024 (E)

The PRESIDENT (translated from Chinese): I declare open the 871st plenary meeting of the Conference on Disarmament.

Before going into the substitutive arrangements for today, allow me to make a few opening remarks as the President of the Conference.

At the outset, I would like to express my deep appreciation of and gratitude to my predecessors. They spared no efforts in consulting with delegations and gathering opinions as widely as possible in order to reach consensus on the programme of work for the Conference on Disarmament. In order to maintain a delicate balance, they weighed every word and sentence and, in the interest of finding a compromise, they laboured over their choice of options, strategies and timing. Unfortunately, even if blue roses may blossom thanks to the wonder of genetic engineering, the Conference on Disarmament is still deadlocked on its programme of work. This does not detract one iota, however, from the wisdom, tenacity, competence and dedication that previous presidents have demonstrated during their arduous terms of office. Here I am particularly grateful to my predecessor, distinguished Ambassador Juan Enrique Vega Patri for his invaluable advice and useful suggestions.

Furthermore, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Secretary-General of our Conference and Personal Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Vladimir Petrovsky, our Deputy Secretary-General, Mr. Enrique Román-Morey, and the entire staff of the secretariat, for all the help and support which they render to me.

Starting this week, the rotating presidency of the Conference falls on China. As China's ambassador for disarmament affairs, I feel greatly honoured to assume this post, but at the same time I am aware of the heavy responsibilities that it entails.

It is known to all that the Conference on Disarmament is the sole global multilateral negotiating forum on international arms control and disarmament. In its membership, it encompasses nearly all the politically and militarily influential States; in mandate, it deals with the weighty issues of international peace and security; in achievements, it can count the conclusion of the Convention on Chemical Weapons and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. As for its potential, the Conference, drawing on the support and inspired by the great expectations of the international community, can bring together experts on arms control and disarmament from all over the world to negotiate highly complicated disarmament treaties.

Needless to say, the Conference on Disarmament faces a difficult situation - its past glories cannot make up for its current lack of progress; for all its large membership, it is accomplishing little; the international community has high hopes but the Conference remains paralysed. This cannot but cause worry and concern.

(The President)

How can the Conference regain its past glory? People have explored and devised various options, including a reform of procedure, to clear the way for the Conference on Disarmament to resume substantive work. At the same time, many have examined in depth why the Conference has been deadlocked for so long. I have no intention here to elaborate on the big topic of the "fundamental reasons for the present deadlock in the Conference on Disarmament".

As I recall, in his farewell speech last September, our former Deputy Secretary-General, Mr. Abdelkader Bensmail, made a few thought-provoking remarks when he said: "Multilateral disarmament forums have always evolved over the years in response to changed political realities. The Conference on Disarmament is no exception in this respect, and the difficulties it now faces are not due to what is perceived by some as the rigidity of its rules of procedure, of its working methods and the group system. They are rather a reflection of the complexity and the dynamics of contemporary international relations, and therefore all efforts should focus on the creation of a political climate conducive to the full use of the Conference as a negotiating forum, in particular on the restoration of a minimum harmony among the major players."

"The situation is more powerful than individual efforts". This may be an appropriate summary of Mr. Bensmail's remarks. The Conference on Disarmament handles the important topics of arms control and disarmament, which have a bearing on international peace and security and are closely related to the overall international security situation and the security of each country. Empty talk of arms control and disarmament in isolation from the international security situation is nothing more than an attempt to build castles in the air. Similarly, efforts to tackle arms control and disarmament without coming to grips with the important issues influencing the overall situation or without considering individual countries' fundamental security concerns are like streams without sources or trees without roots. This is an exercise devoid of meaning.

Where, then, is the Conference on Disarmament heading? From the President's vantage point, I cannot offer a clear answer. Arms control and disarmament efforts are at a crossroads. The direction of the Conference on Disarmament is determined not by any individual, nor by any country or group of countries. It depends upon the joint efforts of the whole international community, all States and all delegations.

As I assume the presidency, what I wish to convey to you is neither a sense of pessimism, which may make you lose confidence, nor a sense of euphoria which may disappoint you later. In seeking consultations and cooperation with all delegations to advance the work of the Conference, I shall be guided by the principles of fairness, impartiality and openness.

I would now like to turn to some considerations of our plan of work and seek your responses.

(The President)

Essentially, the duties of the President are defined in paragraphs 9, 10, 11 and 12 of the rules of procedure of the Conference on Disarmament. In this regard, paragraphs 29, 34 and 42 are also relevant. Besides, can paragraph 5 (d) of document CD/1036 be put into practice? And how? This still remains a question.

I intend to build upon the work done by my predecessor, distinguished Ambassador Vega, who in his statement last Thursday outlined three scenarios regarding the question of our "programme of work" and four proposals or assumptions about "complementary actions". That is a sound description of the present situation.

I intend to continue exploring these three scenarios and four proposals, to see if there is within them something on which everybody can agree, that it to say, to find that precious "consensus". Of course, during the process, any new ideas and proposals, additions or specific steps related to the seven options will be welcome.

I wish to explore the "programme of work" and "complementary actions" in parallel without giving priority to one or the other. The reason is that my term of office covers the last two weeks of March and the two weeks in mid to late May. It seems inappropriate mechanically to assign the first period to the "programme of work" and, even if no progress is made, to proceed in May to a discussion of the "complementary actions".

As for the "programme of work", the Conference on Disarmament recognizes "the support of the Conference for CD/1624 as a basis for further intensified consultations". This position is still shared by all in the Conference. In this regard, the picture seems to be quite clear: most delegations either agree with or go along with all the options, while a few delegations are either strongly opposed to one or the other option, or accept no "consensus" on any of them. I will see if the situation remains the same, if there are any changes or if any new options can be envisaged.

Regarding the "complementary actions", the situation is more confused. Some ideas have been put forward but we have also heard some opposing views. But are these "opposing views" actually a case of everybody agreeing and one party holding out? Do they mean that no negotiated agreement can emerge? These are questions that I shall be putting to every delegation. At the same time I shall see whether there are any further additions to, or moves to give effect to, the existing four "complementary actions", and whether there are any new proposals besides them.

During my term of office, I shall conduct wide consultations with delegations, listen to their opinions and convey to them the ideas and proposals of other delegations. I shall naturally attach great importance to exchanges of views with the three group coordinators, because they represent the positions and views of their respective groups. I hope all delegations and groups will take the initiative in putting forward ideas, solutions and proposals and join me in holding consultations between countries and groups in a common effort to further the work of the Conference on Disarmament.

(The President)

During my consultations, I shall state the position of China as and when appropriate. In so doing, I will do my best to distinguish clearly between when I am speaking as the President of the Conference and when I am stating China's position. I shall seek to avoid confusion.

I shall be circumspect about submitting "proposals by the President". Most probably I shall make specific proposals as the President only when there apparently exists a "basis for consensus". One consideration is to avoid playing a "misplaced role", at least this is my view for the time being.

Distinguished colleagues, we can only proceed with our work in accordance with the principle of consensus contained in rule 18 of our rules of procedure. I am looking forward to close collaboration with all delegations and shall count on your understanding, cooperation and support. Our objective is to work together to make progress in the Conference on Disarmament, which is so valuable to us.

Thank you.

Distinguished colleagues, I have only one speaker inscribed on my list for today's plenary meeting, the representative of the Russian Federation. I now give the floor to the representative of the Russian Federation, Ambassador Sidorov.

Mr. SIDOROV (Russian Federation) (translated from Russian): Mr. President, at the outset I would like to congratulate you on your assumption of the presidency of the Conference on Disarmament at this crucial stage in its operation. I wish you every success and assure you of my delegation's readiness for constructive cooperation.

Since this is my first statement during this year's session of the Conference on Disarmament, I would like also to welcome our new colleagues who have joined us in our work.

The issue of the prevention of an arms race in outer space has been for many years and remains one of the top priorities for Russian diplomacy. I wish to recall that our country has repeatedly taken initiatives in this field. The best-known among them are the proposals advanced in the early 1980s concerning the conclusion of one treaty prohibiting the deployment in outer space of any kind of weapons and another banning the use of force in outer space and from space against the Earth.

In his address at the Millennium Summit in the United Nations on 6 September 2000, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, stated: "Particularly alarming are plans for the militarization of outer space. In the spring of 2001 we shall be celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the first manned flight to outer space. That man was our compatriot and we are suggesting that on that date, under the auspices of the United Nations, an international conference on the prevention of the militarization of outer space be organized. I think that the most appropriate venue will be Moscow".

(Mr. Sidorov, Russian Federation)

Comprehensive preparations are currently being made for such a conference, which is designed to serve the twofold purpose of addressing both the issue of preventing the introduction of weapons into outer space and the prospects for the peaceful uses of outer space. These goals are also reflected in the forum's logo "Weapons-free outer space - the arena for peaceful cooperation in the twenty-first century".

The conference is scheduled to conduct its work over four days from 11 to 14 April 2001. Three of these days will be devoted to meetings and one will feature a tour of memorable places associated with Yury Gagarin and of the Russian space-related scientific and industrial organizations. The conference will be held in the format of several symposia. One of these will be specifically dedicated to the issue of the prevention of an arms race in outer space, as addressed in resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly.

Representatives of national space agencies, foreign and defence ministries, academies of science, leading outer-space-related scientific and research centres, commercial and industrial companies, international and non-governmental outer space organizations, universities, scientific and education centres, insurance companies and banks engaged in outer-space-related activities, and also cosmonauts and astronauts have been invited to attend the forum.

It is a matter of great satisfaction to us to be able to announce today that the international community is demonstrating considerable interest in the Moscow conference. More than 40 countries and international organizations, with the United Nations in pride of place, have already officially confirmed their participation. The countries will be represented at the level of heads or deputy heads of national space agencies, deputy ministers for foreign affairs or senior officials of the ministries of foreign affairs or other government departments. A large number of representatives from non-governmental organizations and the academic community are also planning to take an active part in the Moscow forum.

In view of the marked interest shown in the forthcoming Moscow conference by delegations to the Conference on Disarmament, we have prepared a brief information note about the forum and will be distributing it as an annex to this statement.

Mr. President, in pursuing its initiative to convene an international conference on the non-militarization of outer space, Russia has of course taken into account that human activities in outer space may have various different objectives.

On the one hand, these may be aimed at creating what we might call a climate of trust and predictability and ensuring control over the compliance with international agreements in the area of arms reductions, through the launching by military agencies of outer space monitoring, communications and navigation systems. In the long run such activities would lead to the strengthening of international security.

On the other hand, there is a real threat of the possible creation and deployment of military outer space systems which would undermine global strategic stability.

(Mr. Sidorov, Russian Federation)

Russia would like to draw the attention of the international community to this issue so that, by our joint efforts, we can avert these dangerous developments. We share the view that the elaboration right now of specific measure to prevent an arms race in outer space would help to obviate the enormous expense entailed by having to disarm it in the future. We believe that the speedy elaboration of an international legal regime prohibiting the deployment in outer space of weapons other than weapons of mass destruction, should become one of the principal undertakings of the international community.

Russia's initiative is universal in nature. It is not targeted against the interests of any State. We proceed from the premise that the contemporary norms of outer space law contain "blank spots" and do not ensure a comprehensive and effective ban on an arms race in outer space. They limit only certain - albeit important - types of military activities of States, particularly those related to the testing and launching into outer space of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction.

In Russia's view, one approach that might be explored would be to exclude, on a clearly defined legal basis, the stationing of any type of weapons in outer space, to renounce the use or threat of the use of force in outer space, from outer space or towards outer space and to prevent an arms race in outer space and, even worse, its degeneration into a battlefield. We are convinced, however, that such work on outer space issues should not result in the creation of obstacles to the peaceful exploration of outer space.

Given that the forthcoming conference is being timed to coincide with the anniversary of Yury Gagarin's flight, considerable attention will be paid to the issues of the peaceful use of outer space and international - including commercial - cooperation in its exploration as a real alternative to the militarization of outer space. Accordingly, three of the four symposia scheduled to take place within the framework of the conference will be devoted to the issues of a peaceful outer space, including piloted outer space activities, outer space ecology, the use of outer space resources for the purposes of sustainable development and outer space education.

This international conference on the prevention of an arms race in outer space should, as proposed by Russia, be neither a negotiating exercise nor an academic occasion. We would like it to take the format of a "brainstorming session", in which participants can recount the results of the exploration of outer space, describe new projects, exchange views and hold discussion. We are ready for such a dialogue. We would be glad to hear and support any suggestions from partners aimed at strengthening strategic stability and at further mutually beneficial cooperation in the peaceful exploration of outer space.

We hope that each country will be able to find topics of interest to it in the agenda of the Moscow conference.

Thank you for your attention.

The PRESIDENT (translated from Chinese): I thank the representative of the Russian Federation for his statement and for the kind words addressed to the Chair. Does any other delegation wish to take the floor at this stage?

Distinguished colleagues, I wish to inform you that the secretariat has received a note verbale from the Permanent Mission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea stating that, owing to the increasing workload and shortage of staff in the Mission, it has decided not to take on the presidency of the Conference on Disarmament for the period from 20 August to 31 December 2001. Accordingly, I have requested the secretariat to approach the next country on the list of members of the Conference, to ascertain whether it would be prepared to assume the presidency for this period. I will keep you all duly informed of the results of these consultations.

This concludes our business for today.

As you may recall, at the plenary meeting last week the then President informed the Conference that, following the request of the ambassadors of the Netherlands and Switzerland and after consultations with the group coordinators, the plenary meeting originally scheduled for 29 March had been cancelled. Accordingly, the next and the last plenary meeting for this part of the session will be held on Tuesday, 27 March 2001, at 10 a.m.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.